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Cunningham, Robert

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(Pamphlet)

# CHRISTMAS EVE

ON

# STANLEY STREET.

BY A GLOBE REPORTER.



NAPANEE:

S. T. HAMMOND, PUBLISHER.

1869.

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ON

## STANLEY STREET.

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BY A GLOBE REPORTER.

*(The late A. Cunningham  
M.P.)*

NAPANEE:

S. T. HAMMOND, PUBLISHER.

1869.

CHRISTIANITY

STANLEY STREET

BY A GOOD REPORTER

REPRINTED  
S. T. HANNOXD, PUBLISHER  
1860

## PREFACE.

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GLOBE OFFICE, January 12, 1869.

MR. S. T. HAMMOND,

*Dear Sir,*—I am not aware that the article, "CHRISTMAS EVE ON STANLEY STREET," requires any introduction at my hands. It is a plain unvarnished tale of what we saw and heard that evening. The facts speak for themselves, and show how vice can drag down not only individuals but communities. That the facts teaching so sad a truth should have existence, must be regretted by every right-thinking man, as well as by

Yours truly,

R. CUNNINGHAM.

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# CHRISTMAS EVE

ON

## STANLEY STREET.

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It was a pleasant thing to pass along the streets on Christmas eve. Though the frost was keen, and the wind biting cold, somehow there seemed to be warmth emanating from within the hearts of the passengers, that affected the very atmosphere itself, and every face was radiant with affection and joyous expectancy. Here was to be seen one man hurrying along with a goose in one hand, and a shoulder of mutton in the other, evidently eager to reach home in order to receive the plaudits of a loving spouse, for the skill and discrimination he had shown in his purveying expedition. There was another, standing fairly bewildered, the very picture of indecision, among the gorgeous array of the toy shops—pricing the most absurd articles—now, with a tremendous effort, deciding on one thing, and the next moment as fairly at sea as ever—and at last—impelled by those happy faces which his mind's eye saw gazing into stockings in the morning—making one desperate plunge and bearing off triumphantly along the streets, what on ordinary occasions he would have felt rather ashamed to be seen with. There was another young man, standing before the jeweller's windows, wondering with all his might as to with what

it would be best for him to surprise that dear girl whom he loves so well, on the morrow. In fact everybody seemed happy, and not only that, but everybody seemed resolved to make everybody else as happy as they were, and so all were cheerful and happy.

And yet not all—there was one little girl about six years old, whom I noticed in King Street, whose little soul seemed untouched with the general warmth. She was thinly clad, the keen cold air pierced to her very soul, and she cried and sobbed. Now she sought shelter from the biting blast in some doorway, and now she would rush out with her bundle of newspapers, as she saw a passer-by, and beseech him to buy an evening paper. The poor little creature seemed sadly out of keeping with the general order of things on Christmas eve.

"Why don't you go home on such a night as this?" I enquired of her as she offered me her wares; "it's too cold for a little girl like you to be out in."

"I must sell my papers first, or my mother would beat me," she said, crying.

"Where do you live? and have you no father to take care of you, that you have to work so late?"

"Yes, I have a father, but he is in bed, and we live in Stanley Street."—"Evening paper, sir," and she attacked another passenger.

At last I bought her remaining papers—there were eight of them—and away she sped. I followed her, and saw her open a door and disappear inside. I approached the house, and I heard the sound of blows, and the hoarse voice of a man crying "Where are the two cents? Speak, you little ——, or I'll break every bone in your body." With some trepidation I opened the door, and there I saw a big, strong man, clutching the arm of a poor little waif with one hand, while his other was elevated ready to descend upon her little frail body.

"Who are you, and what do you want here?" he said in a threatening manner to me, as I entered.

I explained that I had felt interested in his girl, and thought she scarcely was treated as a girl of her years should be.

"You mind your own business," said he, and then turning to the girl, he roared "where are the other two cents?"

"Oh! Father, I was hungry and bought a cake," and a box on the ear sent the little girl spinning into a corner, where she stumbled and fell over the body of a woman, who was lying helplessly drunk on a pallet of straw, on the floor. These are *facts*—stern, hard facts, and the question may be fairly put whether that lazy, loafing, drunken man, and that wretched woman, should thus be allowed to traffic away the body and soul of that poor, miserable creature. She had to bear the biting cold of a Christmas eve; they had a blazing stove to sit by; she was famished with hunger, while they had abundance of whiskey; and she was forced to go about with a lie in her mouth, in order that they might have material to satisfy the most debased appetites.

My curiosity was so aroused by this incident, that I resolved to see a little more of Stanley Street, and Dummer Street; so, having secured the services of a police officer, I started on my expedition, and I was somewhat agreeably disappointed with the result. I failed to discover that stark, ghastly poverty that is to be found in the slums of such cities as London and Edinburgh. There was enough of vice, and dirt, and profanity, it is true; but there was a general diffusion of warmth and comfort, which is not usually to be found conjointly with those. And though a Poor-law system were introduced to-morrow, the great difficulty would, in my opinion, be to find the people to whom its provisions could justifiably be applied. Poverty does not seem a necessity in Toronto, though dissipation and thriftlessness are realities.

The first house I visited was in Church Street, and is owned by a colored woman. It seems that this is one of

the most notorious places of resort for bad characters to be found in the city. At the time of my visit, however, there was no indication of its being anything of the kind. A roaring stove made the place comfortable; two chairs, which were nearly all the furniture the place contained, served as resting-places for two darkies, who were both in the very acme of alcoholic bliss. I had never seen a fuddled negro before, and really it was an amusing picture. The hideous contortions their faces underwent; the extraordinary attempts they made to sing; together with the intense amusement their gestures afforded each other, were most ludicrous. A smart young negress came in while we were there, and behaved herself most discreetly. But the scene was changed when we revisited this place in the morning. The house was filled with a crowd of villanous-looking men and women; some sang, some swore, some quarrelled, and all smoked and drank. A violent altercation was going on between one of the young men and a young woman. She seemed to have the best of it so far as talking went, but a blow on the face and a kick sent her out into the street. The oaths that filled the place made one's flesh creep to listen to. The old negro was so far gone that he could do nothing but ejaculate one favorite oath, which he did on an average once a minute. The smart girl we saw before was now more like one of the Furies than a human being, and the whole scene reminded one of the horrors of Pandemonium. There was little about it to suggest the fact that we were in a Christian land on Christmas eve.

In a house, round the corner, in Stanley Street, we saw a scene somewhat different. When we entered, the only occupant of the house was an old woman, about seventy. In her one hand she held a little picture representing Christ healing the sick man at the pool of Siloam, and this she was studying so eagerly that she did not hear us enter. With her other hand she was holding something to her breast. What it was I could not, for the

life of me, make out, till she removed it and laid it upon the stove, when I discovered that it was the wooden lid of a pot. She was suffering from a disease of the stomach, and the only method she could command in order to convey some heat to the part affected, was to lay upon it this hard piece of wood. She had two sons, but both were torn to pieces by a railway accident some time ago, and her only means of support is an apple-basket, which she carries about the streets. She has two orphan grandchildren, smart little girls, who are totally dependent upon her for support, and yet, amid all her pain and poverty, she seemed to be happy and content; and when she had finished recounting her trials, and pointing to the little picture, said, that "He who was so kind to the poor and distressed in olden times, had been very kind to her too, and wouldn't see her beat," it showed that on Christmas eve good cheer may be altogether wanting in a home, and the home be happy, nevertheless.

How different was the character and life of this old woman from what we saw in other women that night. We approached a house from which we heard issuing a strange medley of sounds. First of all, there was the stentorian voice of a man shouting out, in no very melodious strains, "Norah, the pride of Kildare." To this was added the wailings of a number of children, and above all was the shrill voice of a woman, blaspheming in the most awful manner. We knocked at the door, but instead of giving us admission, she heaped upon us the most fearful abuse, slammed the door in our face, and resumed her blasphemy. Looking in through the window, a curious scene presented itself. Sitting before the stove was the father, still singing away at Norah; on the floor lay a number of children; while up and down the floor marched the influential mother. Her dishevelled hair was hanging about her shoulders; she was partly undressed, and as she brandished her fist in the air, and gave expression to the most shocking language, she looked like an enraged

Pythonesse. Now she would fall upon the children and beat them unmercifully, now she would chime in with her husband occasionally at the end of a stave, now she opened upon him and called him by the most abusive epithets. But he was proof against all that, and continued to sing of Norah, nor even when she knocked him off the chair on the floor, did she manage to ruffle his equanimity, for he picked himself up and began—Norah *de novo*. And it was only when her mood altered, and she sat down and cried as if her heart would break, did he give the least sign of being aware of her presence; but when it came to this, he rose, half filled a tumbler with whiskey, and urged her to drink it.

On the opposite side of the street from this was another house which we visited. We found assembled there four women, all about fifty years of age. The house was full of smoke, and had scarcely an article of furniture in it; yet on the table stood two bottles of gin and four tumblers. We were received very graciously, and invited to partake of the liquor, which we declined with thanks. On making inquiry as to the occasion of such a pleasant little gathering, we were informed by the lady of the house herself, that that morning she had just come out of gaol, and had invited her three friends to a little party in celebration of her recovering her freedom. Her three friends, who were all three-parts drunk, then simultaneously launched out into the most enthusiastic encomiums of the virtues of the much-abused matron, and her black-guard husband was denounced in no measured terms. In reply to a query as to where this unfortunate individual was located at present, it turned out that the villain was locked up in the attic. On expressing a wish to have a sight of the ruffian, a candle was lighted, and ascending a rickety stair, we knocked at the door, and on entering discovered a little, mild-looking man, lying on a bed, without a mattress, or straw, or a shred of bed-clothes. The place was horribly cold, and we expressed our sur-

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prise to see him in such uncomfortable circumstances. The poor fellow shivered and covered his face with his hand, and burst into tears.

"Oh," he said, "heaven only knows what I have suffered through that woman. Drink, drink, she would sell her soul for drink. To-day she came out of prison, and the very first thing she did was to pawn everything she could carry away. Bed-clothes, dishes, even the food was carried out and sold. And then she has ruined my lads. Two of them are in the Penitentiary already, and the other two will soon follow. She trains them to steal and lie, and even to drink, They are out now prowling about the streets, and may be in the hands of the police for aught I can tell."

When asked when or how she learned to drink, he informed us that prior to coming to Canada, fifteen years ago, she had been a respectable, sober woman, but falling in with drunken neighbours, she had learned to drink, and is scarcely ever sober. We tried to comfort the little man, and came away; and when we came through the lower room, we were once more regaled with a tirade on the villain up stairs. We felt heartily sorry for him.

In the course of our expedition, the fact impressed itself more and more upon us, that the most of the domestic misery existing in these localities is caused by the drunkenness of women. Scarcely did we come across a woman that was not more or less under the influence of liquor. In one house was an old creature, stone blind, sitting on a pallet of straw. Even she was drunk; and what a pitiable spectacle it was to see her impotently shaking her withered arm in the air, and declaring, if she could only see to do it, she would break the heads of every one in the room. In another, we saw two women lying helplessly drunk in a bed, among seven or eight children, while another lay on the floor in the same condition. In another house we came upon a woman who was singing merrily an old Irish ballad. Her husband

was in gaol, and she was solacing herself with a glass of whiskey. On inquiring after the children, she lighted a candle, and guiding us up stairs, pointed to what seemed a mass of straw. As we did not exactly understand the meaning of showing us such a sight, to enlighten us she took a broom, and with the handle brushed aside a portion of the straw, and there we discovered the children nestling, like so many little pigs. "They keep each other warm, you know," being her explanation. Another woman we saw sitting shivering with ague, and wasted to a skeleton. Not long ago she was the most vigorous woman in the locality, but drink had destroyed her, and killed her husband, and now on the brink of the grave, her only support is her daughter's dishonor.

In short, from what we saw and heard, the amount of drunkenness among the women of these localities is absolutely frightful to contemplate, and when we take into account the training for evil which falls to the lot of their children, there is little wonder that other vices develope to such a sad extent, and we have not far to seek for the cause of so much immorality in our city. This is a subject which requires to be treated with much delicacy in the columns of a newspaper, yet it is one which merits more attention than it receives. In the course of our tour on Christmas eve, the magnitude which this vice appears to have reached in our city was something beyond belief. Figures were given with respect to it, which we hesitate to quote without further inquiry, but undoubtedly the number of unfortunate women in Toronto is perhaps equal to, if not beyond that of almost any other city, according to the population. Over and over again we came across old women, who were rather comfortably situated, yet who had no apparent means of making a livelihood of any kind. When questioned on this point, some refused to give any reply; others prevaricated in the most transparent fashion; while by others the reply was that they *kept* lodgers who *were all out*. In some instances these

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old women were endeavoring to soothe wailing infants, which belonged, as they said, to girls who *were out*. And about midnight, from all quarters, these poor wretches were seen skulking homewards to these wretched hovels; some drunk and hilarious; others weary and cold, and miserable; and, in one instance, we saw one turned out of doors with her child a few weeks old, because she had failed in raising the money to pay for her board. What a spectacle these two solitary ones formed, wandering through these cold deserted streets on Christmas morning. We visited one block of buildings, the notorious Colenso Terrace, which was externally one mass of moral corruption. In the first den we saw the stove had been overturned in the revels, the house was full of smoke; and there, making strenuous efforts to repair the accident, were four women, who, with their smutty faces and their horrible execrations, looked amid the gloom more like demons than human beings. In the next apartment we found six of these creatures, who so filled the small place as almost to prevent our entering. One was smoking an old pipe; another was wild with liquor, and frantically cried for more drink; another, with an imbecile look, sat by the stove with a poor sickly child on her lap; while a fourth, in a state bordering on delirium tremens, gave vent to the most fearful oaths, and heaped maledictions on the head of the villain who had brought her to this—maledictions so awful and earnest as made one's flesh creep to listen to. Crawling up a broken staircase, we entered another small attic, and here were three more of the same class. One was about sixteen years of age, bashful and shame-faced, who had signalized the Christmas eve of 1868 by fleeing her service, and entering upon her horrible career. Another, a girl of most prepossessing appearance, with stately form and large lustrous eyes, sat brooding alone. When addressed, she was sulky and refused to speak, but when we remarked what a pity it was to see a girl like her in such a

place, her feelings fairly overcame her. "How can I help it?" she cried in a fearful voice! "How can I help it? I am lost; lost, lost forever; I dare not go home; I have broken my father's heart; the man who ruined me won't speak to me; I am lost, and I wish I were dead, like Maggie Thompson. Maggie is well where she is compared with what I am," and here she subsided into a hysterical state, and sat moaning and moving backwards and forwards, like a poor broken-hearted creature as she was. On inquiring as to who Maggie Thompson was, it turned out that she was a girl who had died in that room a week or two ago. Her history was the old, old story. But one little episode of her death-bed is worth recounting. When she came to realize the fact that death was near, her memory travelled back to her Scottish home, and recalled to her the days when she was the joy of her mother, and the pride of her father's heart; and the godly teachings she enjoyed from both came so vividly to her recollection, that the seed sown then seemed to be taking root even now in that ungenial soil. She sent an eager message to a clergyman to come and visit her, but he refused. Again she sent a similar, but still more entreating message, and again he refused, and that poor soul, yearning after some kind word of comfort and instruction, passed into eternity, uncared for, with the sounds of cursing from a neighboring room ringing in her ears. Such was the end of Maggie Thompson, and such is the end of all these unfortunates. To-day they are flaunting in silks, to-morrow they are shivering in rags. Lower and lower down is their inevitable fate. Drink they must have to deaden the stings of conscience, and when the supply of that necessary is cut off, conscience, with a fearful energy, sets to work and drives them to the lunatic asylum, or the grave.

The causes that lead to this state of matters in our midst, are as various as they are difficult to be dealt with. One poor girl whom we saw maintained that soldiers'

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uniforms was one of the most disastrous agencies at work in the ruin of girls here; another dated her downward career from Sunday night walking on Yonge Street; and really when one passes along that street of a Sunday evening, and observes the system of making acquaintance carried on there, it is little to be wondered at that the consequences are frequently so disastrous. And parents would do well, and the public would do well, were the one to forbid and the other in some way to prohibit this custom.

Hitherto we have spoken chiefly of the women in the district, and the reason is that there seemed to be few men connected with the establishments we visited. There were, however, one or two worthy of notice. One of them is rather a famous character in the city, and was most gloriously drunk. His eloquence was quite overpowering. It seems that he is busy managing an election canvass in one of the wards, and as he stood flourishing the bottle of brandy in the one hand, and a tumbler in the other, declaiming in good set terms on the influence he can exercise in swaying an election, it gave us rather a poor notion of civic honors. By and by he got to be pathetic; cursed the day he had ever come to a country where whiskey was so cheap; made a teetotal vow with a Christmas reservation, drank nearly a tumbler of the brandy, and sunk back into his chair almost senseless. And yet there is a kind heart within him too. He sustains four children, who but for him would be utterly destitute, and loves them, he said, as well as his own. One other fellow we came across, who, though preëminently sober and well-doing, annoyed us perhaps more than anything we saw. His great failing was laziness. His house was in the worst possible locality, and repair; he pays four dollars a month for it; he is well aware that a much better house in a much better locality could be got for the same money, yet he cannot be bothered moving. The whole principle of his life is "he can't be

bothered." His wife, a most respectable woman, means to get into a purer atmosphere, moral and physical, but he can't be bothered. He has a fine child which he is well aware will grow up badly in such a place, but there's time enough. His house has scarcely any furniture, and the bed-clothes are of a very nondescript character, yet sawing wood is desperate hard work, and he can't be bothered. In fact he was the very type of a lazy Scotchman, and would be much the better of a fortnight in the place of the little man who was locked up in the attic.

We continued our peregrinations till about three in the morning, and by that time the respectable part of the population were gone to bed, whilst in the more famous dens, Christmas revels were going on fast and furious. It would be useless to describe these, they were of the usual kind, and in fact we began to find our casual work getting rather dangerous. On several occasions when we asked admission, "Whiskey Mason,"—to whose corps we were believed to belong—was spoken of in terms far from complimentary, and the fear they showed for the presence of that functionary, clearly illustrated the fact that a wholesale system of shebeening was at work. And it is worthy of note that all the most notorious houses are fitted up as bar-rooms, with all the necessary adjuncts. As we passed homewards, the last thing we heard in Stanley Street that morning were the fearful shrieks of a girl who was being hauled to the station by a policeman. "My mother is at home with a broken leg," was her cry, but the policeman ordered her to shut up, as he knew she had no mother. It was a pity that it was so. Had she had a mother, instead of occupying a cell in a police station that Christmas morning, she might have been reclining on that mother's breast, dreaming of a future of love and happiness, which can never now be hers.

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